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The Abolition Of Rulership Or The Rule Of All Over All?

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12th June 2017

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close to the etymology of the word (the rule of all over all) and its near universal associations (majority rule).

One might object on the semantic grounds that it's better to assign our words to their most positive possible interpretations, but I do think it's important to have words for bad things, to be able to describe the array of possibilities we oppose with any sort of detail. It's important to be able to see and comprehend the various flavors oppressive systems can take. Even if we don't presently live in a full-blown democracy with all the horrors of a true domination of all over all, it's still an illuminating extreme and one that I think warrants highlighting.

Anarchism's uniqueness is that it doesn't seek to equalize rulership but to demolish it, a radical aspiration that cuts through the assumptions of our dystopian world. Anarchism isn't about achieving a *balance* of domination — assuring that each person gets 5.2 milliHitlers of oppression each — but about *abolishing* it altogether.

concerned only with what can be won here and now. Our most famous triumphs have been our foresight — often our predictions of dangers to come from various stripes of “pragmatism” and “immediacy.” Anarchism is a philosophy of infinite horizons, taking the longest and widest possible scope. An ethical philosophy of stunning and timeless audacity, not some historical artifact trapped in a limited set of concerns. This sweeping consideration is what enabled us to correctly predict the failures of Marxism, and it’s a tradition worth maintaining. Bakunin’s denouncement of Marx took place in a context long before Kronstadt and all the atrocities that would eventually become popularly synonymous with Marxism. Such “abstract philosophy” and non-immediacy split the ranks of those fighting against the capitalist order, weakening what they could bring to bear in the service of workers’ lives that very minute. And yet the world is clearly all the better for it. Thanks to the anarchist schism with Marxism, the struggle for freedom was able to survive.

I’m not saying that a system of direct democratic town councils are going to be set up somewhere in the world tomorrow under the banner of “direct democracy” and turn genocidal or into some kind of totalitarian small town nightmare, but every take on “democracy” is nevertheless pretty distant from anarchy and thus unlikely to stay true. When your ideal isn’t pointed at freedom itself it’s only a matter of time before the runaway compounding processes of domination warp its path.

I am, at the end of the day, happy to grimace slightly and move along when some comrade I’m working with spouts something about “more democratic than democracy!” just as I’m capable of biting my tongue with the sincere but confused trapped in Marxist or anarcho-capitalist languages. Semantic battles are not the be-all and end-all, but attempts to appropriate the general goodwill towards “democracy” have yet to latch onto any underlying concepts worth validating. It seems to me that a far better practice is to stick somewhere

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side of the debate over “democracy”. The issue with representation in my mind isn’t the lack of immediacy but a matter of limits to the flow of information. It’s a subtle but crucial difference.

A number of anarchists or former anarchists have in recent years increasingly grown to treat immediacy as the secret sauce — the very definition of freedom. This stems from a philosophical confusion over what freedom is and a very continental or psychological focus upon emotional affect, focusing on a phenomenological experience they associate with “freedom” — that is to say a kind of spontaneity or impulsive reaction rather than reflection (since in our present world reflection often brings to attention just how constrained we actually are). To consider an action is precisely to chain it through a series of mediations, to filter and parse it. It’s important to note that the reactionary approach smothers one’s internal complexity, ultimately reducing an agent to a mere billiard ball. When treated as an ideal, immediacy necessarily involves the suppression of consciousness and thus of choice.

The problem with collective decisionmaking isn’t that the discrete deliberative bodies involved process information or ponder choices, but that such arrangements are ridiculously inefficient at it compared to individual autonomy: an embrace of the full agency of their constituents. A more organic network of reflective individuals would provide more choice — that is to say more freedom.

Against All Rulership, Always

To people in the trenches just trying to grab whatever weapons they find useful, all this philosophical criticism of “democracy” no doubt appears to be an ungainly impediment. But anarchism is not a pragmatic project myopically

but as anarchists our every inclination and instinct should be to avoid such means by default, to only cede to them kicking and screaming, and never cease feeling distaste. We must not lose sight of our ideals and even as we can only asymptotically approach them we must still attempt to asymptotically approach *them* rather than asymptotically approaching some halfway point.

And of course let us not forget that a world where say a social democrat like Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn gets their way might even actually end up *worse* than our present horrorshow. Liberal and socialist policies have a long history of making worse the things they were supposedly out to fix.

Okay, but isn't that unfair since the whole point is direct democracy?

A Note About “Directness”

It's annoying how often young activists attempt to create a spectrum of democracy with varying levels of mediation or representation that places anarchy as synonymous with the most direct democracy. It's true that depending upon a representative to speak on your behalf is an insanely inefficient approach — anyone who's dealt even just with spokescouncils pooling few dozen people knows this. We know that due to the shallow bandwidth of human language, conversation itself is ridiculously inefficient at a means of conveying the fullness of our internal desires and perspectives, so delegating to someone else with only the vaguest of outlines of what you want is surely much worse.

But what I find particularly pernicious about the reduction of anarchism to a mere “direct” qualifier on “democracy” is that it plays into a fetishization of immediacy that has already ideologically metastasized among anarchists, indeed often among those more insurrectionary or individualist figures on the other

Fighting over the definitions of words can sometimes seem like a futile and irrelevant undertaking. However it's important to note that whatever language gets standardized in our communities shapes what we can talk and think about. So much of radical politics often boils down to acrimonious dictionary-pounding over words like “capitalism,” “markets,” “socialism,” “communism,” “nihilism,” etc. Each side is usually engaged in bravado rather than substance. Radical debates turn into preemptive declarations of “everyone knows X” or “surely Y,” backed by nothing more than the social pressure we can bring to bear against one another. And yet — to some degree — we're trapped in this game because acquiescing to the supposed authority of our adversaries' definitions would put us at an unspeakable disadvantage. The stakes of debates over “mere semantics” can be quite high, determining what's easy to describe and what's awkward or laborious.

Thus the partisan impulse is usually to define our adversaries out of existence: muddying their analytic waters, emphasizing any and all negative associations, and painting their conclusions as insane, verboten, or outgroup. At the same time we leap on any and all positive associations we can twist to serve our own ends. Debate over definitions is so often merely a game of social positioning: every word reverberating with the different associations of different audiences and thus what alliances you're declaring or managing to ascribe to your interlocutor. Language is a messy, complicated, and nebulous place where fallacious arguments are not only par for the course but often thought to be how the whole thing hangs together. In the worst corners of academia and “radical” politics this is embraced wholesale, where philosophy is reduced to mere poetry and cheap ploys of emotive resonance: batted back and forth with an underlying smug derision at the entire affair. *“Have you ever noticed that we use the same word for your job — your occupation — as we do for the occupation of Iraq?”* and this is

somewhat treated as insightful rather than doing violence to clarity and honesty.

Obviously my biases here — and social affiliations — are quite apparent. While there can be a place for rhetoric to convey emphasis and it is sometimes necessary to counter fire with fire, in general I find these opportunistic language games detestable. Whenever possible I prefer a subversive linguistic pluralism, happy to adopt the language of those I'm speaking to, declaring myself, for example, pro-“capitalism” or pro-“communism” in some contexts and against “capitalism” or against “communism” in others. If by “capitalism” some poor soul means nothing more than economic freedom then I'm fine adopting his tribe's language to reach him — the same holds true with “communism”. Yet opportunities for such ecumenism are few and far between; even in those situations where we can escape tribal jockeying and arguments from popularity, such words almost always carry hidden baggage through their broader associations, with the explicit definition hiding the implicit conclusions of its wider use. When it comes to semantics, I'm of the opinion that our first step should always be to discard popular associations as much as possible and decipher what are the most illuminating or fundamental dynamics at play, *only then* attempting to realign or reserve our most basic words for the most rooted concepts. If our final mapping of concepts to terms is idiosyncratic or provocative, or if it strips away the full array of associations found in common use, then perhaps all the better.

While such an approach is often contentious, I believe that it offers a relatively nonpartisan compromise and starting point in definition debates. Let us hold off as much as possible on barraging each other with claims about what's more “authoritative,” much less what can be leveraged as proof of such, and likewise abandon the negative and positive association-judo. We can always return to this after we've sorted out what sort of realities are even before us to map our vocabulary to. This

highlight among all of them is both a lack of any explicit anti-authoritarianism as well as a series of lurking problems that risk warping things in an authoritarian direction.

In some situations, certain things going by the name “democracy” would likely pose half-steps in the direction of anarchism. The replacement of a feudal lord with a village assembly would almost certainly be an improvement. We can get distracted with concerns about possible failure modes and lose sight of what's actually happening on the ground. Just because the democratic processes of Rojava could theoretically bend in a more sharply nationalistic or racially oppressive direction doesn't mean that they actually are. There are many situations where participatory democracy represents a major step forward, even something anarchists should fight for with our lives.

But when democracy is idealized — when it's generalized or elevated as an ideology rather than as a pragmatic strategy in a specific context — things gets dangerous. The risk of such idealization is inherent to its use. And oftentimes democracy serves as a half-measure that actually impedes further progress. The Chomskyian strategy of compromise and “incremental steps” that secure bread today can actually further entrench power structures while providing minor ameliorations.

Democracy is in almost every definition a kind of centralization and such centralization pulls everything under its control. Just as with other types of states, once you establish a centralized system with far-reaching capacity it starts to become more efficient for individual agents to try to do everything through the state: to capture it for your ends rather than working to build solutions from the roots up outside of it. Even those with sharp anarchist ideals start feeling the pressure to go to the General Assembly rather than doing things outside of it as actual agents.

Like shooting people, in our messy and deeply dystopian world democracy may sometimes be necessary and strategic,

Certainly we anarchists leap to defend the unwashed masses from those sneering elites. The prospect that the rabble would demolish the elites' positions of power or get up to dirty and uncouth things with their freedom is something we embrace. But just because we despise those who despise "the rabble" doesn't mean we should embrace any and all mobs or the concept of "the mob" itself. The positives that can be wrestled from this use of the term surely aren't worth explicitly opening the door to "mobocracy".

This archaic use of "democracy" has obvious subversive potential in our present world, flipping the positive affect built around "democracy" by our current rulers and returning it to those in conflict with them. But anarchists are not blind proponents of "the masses" in any and all situations, something this rhetorical opportunism would lock us into. The masses can be horrifically wrong, and what is popularly desired can be quite unethical. It's not vanguardism to resist pogroms or work to thwart the genocidal ambitions of majorities like in Rwanda. There are endless examples of "the masses" seeking to dominate, and our goal as anarchists is not to pick sides but to make such rulership impossible or at the very least *costly*.

Anarchists aren't engaged in team sports; while we often defend underdogs in specific contexts, we're not out to back one demographic against another in any kind of fundamental way.

Okay, but does "democracy" still have a role as a transitory state?

Democracy as a Transitory State

This is a complicated issue because obviously it depends on a host of abstract and practical particulars. We've covered a lot of different definitions one encounters among apologists for "democracy" in anarchist circles, and what I've tried to

offers us a certain efficiency, handling some quite heavy work at the start, but at least offering us something other than an endless quagmire going forward. More important though is the danger that jumbled interpretive networks or misaligned concepts pose when normalized. Terms that fail to cut reality at the joints can mislead and obscure, make some basic realities incredibly hard to state or address. In language we should seek depth, generality, and accuracy first and foremost, not mere rhetorical expedience. There is a place for the play of "interestingly" open interpretations but such hunger should not consume us and sever our capacity to act.

Democracy and Anarchy

In many contemporary western societies "democracy" retains positive (if nebulous) associations. Naturally, many activists have therefore repeatedly tried to latch onto that term and redirect it in narratives or analysis that line up with their own political aspirations. "You like chocolate, right? Well anarchism is basically extra chocolately chocolate. It's more chocolate than chocolate. It's like *direct* chocolate."

This opportunistic wordplay is at least self-aware, and such maneuverings seems fair game to many. After all, isn't "anarchy" a similarly nebulous word — a site of contention and redefinition?

Yet I'd argue that the situations are quite different. The fight over "anarchy" is an inescapable one for anarchists because the world we want will never be obtainable as long as the term's historical definition goes unchallenged. In every language that touched ancient Greek, "anarchy" bundles together the explicit definition of "without rulership" with the implicit definition of "fractured rulership" (what should really be called 'spasarchy') in a nasty Orwellianism that makes the concept of a world without domination unspeakable and often unthinkable. We have a

term for the abolition of power relations and we use it instead to refer to chaotic, violent, dog-eat-dog situations of strong (albeit decentralized) power relations. In short, the fight over the definition of “anarchy” is a battle to untangle an existing knot.

On the other hand, “democracy” tends to stand for majority rule and etymologically for the rule of all over all. If there is an Orwellianism at play it seems to me one of being *too* charitable to the term, sneaking in associations of freedom when one is in fact describing a particular flavor of tyranny. A situation more akin to “war is peace” than the “freedom is slavery” is at play with “anarchy.”

Honest proponents of democracy can of course contend that such an “ideal” would look nothing like our contemporary world and so the characterization of our nation states as “democracies” misrepresents what true democracy would actually be. But it would still be a dystopia to anarchists. “Rulership by the populace” is clearly a concept irreconcilable with “without rulership” unless one has atrophied to the point of accepting the nihilism of liberalism and its mewling belief in the inescapability of rulership. Or perhaps even going so far as to join with fascists and other authoritarians who silence their conscience with the ideological assertion that one cannot even limit power relations, only rearrange them.

Etymology isn’t destiny but it does carry a strong momentum and corrective force. I’m not sure why we should feel obliged to fight an uphill battle to redefine “democracy” in a direction consistent with anarchist aspirations. And in any case, from an abstract distance it seems wasteful to assign two terms to the same concept.

Those claiming that democracy and anarchy can be reconciled seem to either be rhetorical opportunists — gravely mistaken about what they can and should leverage — or else they seem gravely out of alignment with anarchism’s aspirations, treating “without rulership” not as a guiding star but a non-committal handwave.

are more generally useful to all than their violation in specific instances. Respect for freedom of association is one such very strongly emergent norm.

And in any case the goal of anarchists is freedom, we champion a decentralized world — among other conditions — precisely so that it might dramatically increase our freedom, not chain us down. This means at the very least cultivating a culture of live and let live when someone blocks you on Twitter rather than setting the world ablaze because you feel entitled to their attention.

Similarly if everyone in your generation starts using Snapchat — which you dislike — that puts you at a disadvantage: such an emergent norm clearly affects you in a negative way. But this doesn’t and shouldn’t give you cause to bring your peers before the city council and demand that Snapchat be outlawed. The norms of freedom of association, freedom of information, and bodily autonomy cleave out distinct realms of action that can affect third parties immensely yet should not — barring absolutely extreme situations — be dictated or constrained by them. Every invention and discovery changes the world but you don’t get to vote against the propagation of truth, however disruptive it might be to your life.

Okay, but maybe we can reframe democracy as not as any kind of system but as a demographic?

Democracy as “The Rabble”

In recent times David Graeber has re-popularized the historical association of “democracy” with large underclasses. And it’s true that in certain points in history “democracy” served alongside “anarchy” as a boogeyman of the horrors they were claimed would arise if the ruling elites lost their stranglehold on the populace.

incredibly inefficient arrangement where everyone has to put their internal life in stasis and listen to piles of other people speak one at a time. The information theoretic constraints are profound.

If collective decision-making is supposed to provide us with the positive freedoms possible through collaboration, it offers only the tiniest fraction of what is usually actually possible. That there are occasionally situations so shitty that collective decisionmaking is requisite does not mean anarchists should worship or applaud it. And one would be hardpressed to classify something far more general like *collaboration* itself as “democracy”.

Okay, but maybe we can reframe democracy as an ethics?

Democracy As “Getting a Say in the Things That Affect You”

It got particularly popular in the 90s to frame anarchy as a world where everyone gets a say in the things that affect them. And for a time this seemed to nicely establish anarchism as a kind of unterrified feminism. But let’s be real: there are plenty of things that massively affect you that you should have no vote over. Whether or not your crush goes out with you should entirely be at their own discretion. Freedom of association is quite often sharply at odds with “getting a say over things that affect you.”

This may seem in conflict with the moral we drew from our discussion of consensus and the necessity to create a detente grounded in a respect for individual vetoes, but it’s important to remember that we weren’t settling for the naive first-order resolution where anyone strongly affected by something sets off a nuke. There’s a kind of meta-structure that emerges in any network of people upon consideration. The detentes we ultimately gravitate to involve certain more abstract norms, that

Perhaps this is today the regrettable consequence of a few decades of anarchist recruitment from activist ranks, a conveyor belt that has sadly often resulted in the most shallow of conversions. Rather than a fervent ethical opposition to rulership, we’ve often settled for merely instilling a mild distaste for collaboration with the existing state on leftists, sometimes going no deeper than “you want to accomplish X with your activism but have you noticed that the state is in your way?” This has led to generations of activists — many I count as close friends — who have never considered how they might achieve their standard collection of leftist desires like universal health care in the absence of a state. When pressed they invariably describe a state apparatus, squirming in recognition and cognitive dissonance. *“Oh, sure I’m describing a centralized body wielding coercive force and issuing edicts, but it wouldn’t be, you know, The State... because, like, well it wouldn’t systematically kill black people at the hands of the police.”* Such an anemic analysis of the state’s crimes never ceases to be shocking. Just as the gutless defanging of anarchism’s radical ethical hunger and dismemberment of its philosophical roots to a mere political platform is invariably depressing.

Let us be clear; if anarchy means anything of substance then many of these people are not really anarchists. At least not yet! They do not believe anarchy is achievable or even thinkable. And this is reflected in their own frequent aversion and/or equivocation in relation to the term “anarchy,” gravitating more to some positive associations they have seen made with it than the underlying concept of a world truly without rulership. Compared to our present society they want the things often associated with anarchism without the core that draws them. I was — for a time — hopeful that such individuals would move to the much more open term “horizontalist.” In truth they’d be better described as minarchist social democrats, who want a cuddlier, friendlier, flatter, more local and responsive state that

makes people feel like happy participants and doesn't engage in world historic atrocities.

Yet for those of us who have tasted the prospect of a world *without* rulership, this is simply a difference in degree of dystopia. If it truly were possible to achieve some kind of enlightened social democracy without wealth inequality, systematic disenfranchisement of minorities, and with some decentralization of state function, anarchists would still go to the barricades because *this is not enough*.

If anarchism is to mean anything of substance, it is surely not merely an opening bid from which you are happy to settle. Anarchy doesn't stand for small amounts of domination: it stands for no domination. Although our approach to that ideal will surely be asymptotic, the whole point of anarchism is to actually pursue it rather than give up and settle for some arbitrary "good enough" half-measure. Such tepid aspirations is what has historically defined liberals and social democrats in contrast to us.

But it's important to go further, because "democracy" doesn't solely pose a danger of half-measures but also of a unique dimension of authoritarianism. A pure expression of "the rule of all over all" could be a hell of a lot worse than "Sweden with Neighborhood Assemblies." The etymology itself seems to best reflect a nightmare scenario in which everyone constrains and dominates everyone else. If we seek to match words to the most distinct and coherent concepts then perhaps the truest expression of "demo-cracy" would be a world where everyone is chained down by everyone else, tightening our grip on our neighbors just as they in turn choke the freedom from our lungs.

To be sure few proponents of "democracy" specifically define it as "the rule of all over all." There are many distinct dynamics that folks single out and focus on, but none of these definitions directly address the problem of rulership itself.

engendering a sense of altruism or empathy. If anything collective meetings are horrible draining experiences that scar everyone involved and only partially satiate the most isolated and socially desperate. Like a starving person eating grass, the nutrition is never good enough and so the activist becomes trapped in endless performative communities, going to endless group meetings to imperfectly reassure base psychological needs rather than efficaciously change the world for the better. (I say such cutting words with all the love and sympathy of someone who's nevertheless persisted as an activist and organizer attempting to do shit for almost two decades.) Collective decision-making itself is no balm or salve to the horrors that plague this world.

But that's not even the worst of it. Collective decision-making is itself fundamentally constraining. It frequently makes situations worse in its attempt to make decisions as a collective rather than autonomously as networked individuals.

The processing of information is the most important dynamic to how our societies are structured. A boss in a large firm for example appoints middle managers to filter and process information because a raw stream of reports from the shop floor would be too overwhelming for his brain to analyze. There are many ways in which aspects of the flow of information constrain social organizations, but when it comes to collective decision-making the most relevant thing is the vast difference between the complexity our brains are capable of holding and the small trickle of that complexity we are capable of expressing in language. As a rule, individuals are better off with the autonomy to just act in pursuit of their desires rather than trying to convey them in their full unknowable complexity. But when communication is called for it's far far more efficient to speak in pairs one-on-one, and let conclusions percolate organically into generality. "Collective" decision-making almost always assumes a discussion with more than two people — a collective — in an often

cupy's brand. Clearly in many cases we should have just gone our separate ways, working out not a single blueprint but a tolerable treaty to allow us to undertake separate projects or actions. The brand provided by The General Assembly was a centralization too far, creating such a high value real estate that everyone was obliged to fight to seize it. Surely anarchists should resist the formation of such black holes.

Okay, but regardless of the size and permanence of the collectives involved, maybe democracy is just collective decision-making itself?

Democracy as Collective Decision-making

While there are unfortunately many pragmatic contexts on Earth that oblige a degree of collective decision-making, it's dangerous to fetishize collective decision-making itself.

Many young leftist activists get caught with a bug that suggests the core problems with our world are those of "individualism" by which they mean a kind of psychopathic self-interest that is inattentive to others. The solution, this bug tells them, is to do everything collectively. To stomp out anti-social perspectives by obliging social participation. If we all go to meetings together then we'll become more or less friends.

The unspoken transmutation they appeal to is one where extraversion and being enmeshed in social interactions will somehow suppress selfish desires. Of course in reality the opposite is often true. The most altruistic people in the world are often introverted individuals who prefer to act alone and the most psychopathic predators are often those most at home manipulating a web of social relations.

Many leftists are scarred by the alienating social dynamics of our society and seek meetings as a kind of structured socializing time to make friends and conjure a sense of belonging to a community, but this is absolutely not the same thing as

Democracy as Majority Rule

The most conventional definition of democracy among the wider populace is today quite rare in anarchist circles. At this point "majority rules" is rarely advocated by anyone in my experience outside some old fogies in the underdeveloped backwaters of the anarchist world like the British Isles, and its use in ostensibly anarchist meetings or organizations now rises to moderately scandalous. But it's maybe worth reiterating that majority rule can be deeply oppressive to minorities. If 51% of your neighborhood committee votes to eat the other 49% alive, that's a hell of a lot worse than a situation without majority rules where one person refuses to mow their lawn and thus unilaterally inflicts their malaesthetic on the rest of the neighborhood.

Proponents of such tyranny by the majority love to pretend that the only alternative is "tyranny by the minority." But anarchist theory is all about removing the structures and means by which rulership can be asserted or expressed *by anyone*, majority or minority.

This is probably not the place to list them all like some kind of 101 course, but one example is superempowering technologies like guns that asymmetrically make resistance more efficient than domination. Such technologies are directly responsible for the increase of liberty over recent history. In an era where capital intensive undertakings like trained knights on horseback trumped anything else, you got rulership by elites; when the best weapons are one-kill-averaging soldiers, you just line up your troops and the one with the biggest count can be expected to win. But high-ammunition guns give every individual a veto against the lynch mob outside their door, allowing guerrillas to impede empires that vastly outscale them in capital. Technologies like the printing press and internet function similarly. And on the other side of the coin, the infrastructural extent and dependent nature of modern technologies of con-

trol or domination makes them brittle against resistance, easily prey to acts of disruption and sabotage. These tools — along with technologies of resilience and self-sufficiency — allow individuals to reject the capricious edicts of anyone, be they a minority or a majority.

Ideally anarchists seek to highlight and strengthen such dynamics with the political approaches we take, treating everyone like they have the most powerful of vetoes, capable of destroying everything, of grinding everything to a halt if they are truly intolerably imposed upon. This focus on individuals stops “the community” or other beasts from running rampant, forcing a detente tolerable for all parties. Such truces are far more likely to be attentive to the severity of individual desires, because “one vote per person” is incapable of reflecting just how much a person has at stake: something we could never hope to make objective and would be laughable to try to have a collective body legislate.

What norms fall out of such an assumption of veto powers are complex (and I’ve argued left market property norms are likely to be one) but at the center is always freedom of association. The consensus society is one primarily comprised of autonomous realms so that individuals can minimize conflict between their swinging fists and maximize the positive freedoms provided by collaboration. But note also the psychological norms. Majority rule treats people as means to whatever ends you want (rallying a large enough army at the polls), whereas a consensus detente can never lose sight of the fact that people are agents with their own particular desires. There is no subsumption of one’s subjective desires into merely being “one of the vote-losers”, a bloc rendered homogeneous and dehumanized by such democracy.

Okay agree some, but maybe we can say that consensus itself is democracy?

Democracy as Consensus

This is probably the most charitable way of framing “democracy” but here too are deep problems.

There’s a massive difference between consensus that’s arrived at through free association, and consensus that’s arrived because people are locked into some collective body to some degree. Often what passes for “consensus” within anarchist activist projects is merely consensus within the prison of a reified organization. Modern anarchists are still quite bad at embracing the fluidity of truly free association, and we cling to familiar edifices. Our organizations reassure us insofar as they function like the state, simplistic monoliths that exist outside of time and beyond the changing desires and relations of their constituent members.

Truly anarchist approaches to consensus would prioritize making the collectivity organic and ad hoc, an arrangement that prioritizes individual choice in every respect. Not just the prospect or potential of choice but the active use of it.

This would mean adopting an unterrified attitude about dissolution and reformation, learning new habits and growing new muscles that have atrophied in the totalitarian reference frame of our statist world. As it now stands, the prospect of going separate ways on a thing if we can’t reach consensus on a single collectively unified path strikes absolute fear into the hearts of most.

For consensus to be truly anarchistic we must be willing to consense upon autonomy, to shed off our reactionary hunger for established perpetual collective entities. Otherwise consensus will erode back in the direction of majority rules, individuals feeling obliged to tolerate decisions lest they break the uniformity of the established collective. Almost everyone of this generation is quite familiar with the general assemblies of Occupy that endlessly and fruitlessly fought over essentially just what actions would be formally endorsed under a local Oc-